Socially Engaged Art Practice in Bangladesh and India (Potential and Future)

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Introduction

Humans are social beings, so, they live in societies. "Human life" and "Human society" almost go hand in hand. Man is biologically and psychologically required to live in groups as a society. So, a human being cannot survive without a society as well as, a society cannot exist without members. For surviving in a society people contribute to their surrounding by their own field of works. Artists are not different from others. Artists are influenced by their society, nature, culture and these characteristics which get reflected in their art works. As a fine art student I had started my journey in 2008, as an undergraduate student in University of Dhaka with specialization in 'Printmaking'.In the beginning history of printmaking, before the printing press, it was not considered an art form, rather a medium of communication. Hence, printmaking as an art medium or a commercial medium has a relation with the society from its early ages.

Since, then, besides academic I have interests about contemporary art practice in Bangladesh. During that time I have noticed that artists were trying to adept the multidisciplinary approach as a new flow of art. But currently, artists are having some dialogues with the general people through their socially who are engaged in Art projects. They include any art forms which involve people and communities in debate, collaboration or social interaction. The artist's aim is to help this community's work towards common goal, raise awareness and encourage conversation around issues or perhaps to improve their physical or psychological conditions.

Art changes and transforms every day, just as the world around us. That is why, the definition and the way of producing art has been changed continuously. But the artist and the art movements are challenging the concept of previous art movements. While the art world is changes with the art movement, contemporary museums, galleries and art administrations support artist to transform along with it.

Art movements have gradually evolved from questioning the final products of art making to focusing on the art-making process itself. As the world moves into the digital age and the economy is based more on services rather than goods, it only makes sense for the art to move in that direction also, so, Contemporary artists are attempting to move away from the idea of consumerism in art and more towards "social interstice" and relational art. This idea that Nicolas Bourriaud presents uses social interaction as the form or aesthetic in the art project. This creates temporary relationships and interactions within communities as a result of the artist's organization of the project. This way of creating art neglects capitalism and consumerism because there is no end product, but instead relies on interactions and relationships.

By incorporating participation, collaboration and interaction through their art works, artist can realize a social based project, and these types of art projects are known as socially engaged art. Sometimes art critics are hesitant to call it art, because there is no particular end result or object. Here the art is in the interactions and temporary relationships between the participants.

One artist who had a large influence on socially engaged art was German artist Joseph Beuys. Beuys was involved in the Fluxus movement which included a wide array of disciplines including music, theatrical performances, and speeches. The artists involved in Fluxus saw no distinction between art and real life, similar to what the artists who practice SEA strive to do[1] . Beuys is also known for the concept of "social sculpture." The idea of social sculpture revolves around the theory that everyone is an artist or has the capability of creativity, therefore, ruling out art as a profession. Beuys's theory considers all producing activities, whether goods or services, to be capable of being called art [2]. This concept accepts no division between art and life because everyone is able to produce or do something creative. Through public participation, this is a goal of many SEA projects. In this types of project people are involved as a medium or material in the art work by collaborating or participating. Even though some SEA projects are not complete until the artist involves public participants. So, the artist serves as organizer rather than the makers of art.

Typically in traditional designated art spaces, the public comes to view the preserved art

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Page-456,Foster, Hal, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism. Vol. 2. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004. Print.

2 Page-142,Mesch, Claudia, and Viola Michely, eds. Joseph Beuys: The Reader. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2007. Print.

objects within the exhibition space. Likewise A SEA project can take place within the exhibition space of a gallery or museum, but most of these projects are site-specific and rely on public interactions. In order to reach the people that the artist intends to reach, the art must take place within a broader public sphere.

Traditional art objects such as paintings and sculptures can be seen and experienced at any time because they are continually on display. Non-availability is a common property of contemporary art practices such as performance. For instance, the documentation of the performance is the only thing that is viewable after the performance is over. Even though the video or film records the performance, it cannot be considered the artwork itself[3]. This is because human-to-human interactions and the temporary communities they create are important to the concept.

The theory of relational aesthetics proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud, is employed to explain how social interaction and participation can be considered artistic or aesthetic. Bourriaud proposes that relational aesthetics is more than a theory of interactive art, but a theory of current practice in the whole culture which is moving from a goods to a service-based economy.

SEA has evolved and grown greatly over the decades since it began. This type of art first emerged in the social turmoil that came about in the1960s and the social movements that were a part of it. Site -specificity in art work developed in the form of performance art and installation art, which influence socially engaged art practice today. Perhaps one of the most controversial issues surrounding SEA is the terminology. Previously, art based on social interaction has been identified as "relational aesthetics" and "community," "collaborative," "participatory," "dialogue," and "public" art, among many other titles. Recently, "social practice" has been the more favoured term for socially engaged art[4] . Even though this is the case, Helguera proposes that the term "social practice" ignores the involvement of art, from Socially engaged art, on the other hand, actively recognizes the artistic and aesthetic properties used in the practice[5].

Socially engaged art is a practice that straddles the line between activism and art and often involves participation. This quality connects the art with real life and therefore actually engages people in the public sphere outside the gallery. They take pressing social issues and increase public awareness while motivating their communities.

3 Page-29,Bourriaud, Nicolas. Relational Aesthetics. Dijon Les Pes du r el, 2002.

4 Page-3,Helguera, Pablo. Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook. New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011.

5 Page-5,Helguera, Pablo. Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook. New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011.

For my Ph. D research I want to highlight the possibilities of socially engaged art practice in Bangladesh and India. because, The root of civilization as well as the art history of these countries are almost similar or started at the same time period because, once these countries were the part of the same nation, was known as The Grater India or The Great Britain India.

The Grater India is the southern region of Asia. This subcontinent was associated mainly three countries- India, Pakistan, Bangladesh.

Indian subcontinent was subordinated by British from 1858 to 1947, almost the hundred years. But In 1757 after the battle of Plassey, The British East India Company got victory from the nawab of Bengal and not only that for the first time they got power to rule the Bengal part, which later expanded to cover much of India over the next hundred years.
In 1947 Britain in conjunction with India's leading indigenous political organization partitioned the Indian Colony into India and Pakistan. The province of east bengal was made part of Pakistan and was referred to as East Pakistan. West Pakistan was carved from the Northwest provinces of the British Indian empire. This division of territory represented an attempt to create a Muslim nation and a Hindu nation. However, the west and east wings of Pakistan were separated by more than 1000 miles of India. By Creating cultural discontinuity between the two wings the west Pakistan was greatly different in language and the way of life from the former East Pakistan. Because, West Pakistan was more oriented towards the middle east and Arab Islamic influence. On the other side, East Pakistan was more influenced by Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist and British culture. East Pakistan's national identity is rooted in a Bengali culture, which is more associated with west Bengal.

Because of the cultural and language differences East Pakistan wanted independence from west Pakistan. By sacrificing thousands lives, In 1971 East Pakistan got independent after nine months of liberation war and finally formed a new country, name as Bangladesh.

Besides the cultural and language similarities, Bangladesh and India are geographically connected with each other through the rivers - Ganges (Padma in Bangladesh), Brahmaputra, Jamuna, others and the Bay of Bengal also. Not only that, these countries also share several land borders with each other.

India is a multicultural country. It's different states have their own culture and language. Nevertheless these two countries specially Bengali people's life, culture, festival are flowing almost at the same way. Art is not different from that.

In 1850, The Madras school of Art was established in Madras (Presently Chennai) by Surgeon Alexander Hunter as a private art school .Officially It was the oldest art institution in The Greater India. After that, British formed several fine art and commercial art institutions in different part of India. In this flow, in 1854, The school of Industrial art was established in kolkata. This institute later renamed as the Government School of Art in 1951 and it became the the Government College of Art and Craft.

In 1947 after partition Zainul Abedin and other artists who completed there academic education from the Government College of Art and Craft, Kolkata moved to East Pakistan. In 1948 Zainul Abedin established an Art Institution named as- Government Institute of Art, East Pakistan. During this time art practice formally started in Bangladesh.

Now, in the present time, the definition of art is changing day by day, along with that the art practice of Bangladesh and India are also changing. Public art, Community art and SEA basically a new form of art for Bangladesh and India. But If we look back than, we can notice that the attitude of working with the society was visible. Sometimes artist played an important role as an art activist for any political, social and cultural movement. For an example during the time of liberation war of Bangladesh, artist worked as an activist through their art work. They influenced and motivated people by doing posters, graffiti and others. Not only in the field of fine arts, but also this aptitude of SEA is noticeable in Folk Art like scroll paintings. Because, folk artist are belonging from the local community and they are trying to communicate with local community through their art work.

Now a days, Artists from Bangladesh and india are practicing the public art, community base art project, and Socially Engaged Art. As a new form of art, artist are exploring these field sometimes with a group or individually.

Methodology

For my research, I want to discuss the SEA projects and practices, which are done by the artist run organizations or an individual artists. To achieve my goal, I will set a time frame. I will focus on the SEA projects after 1990's - the time period of relational aesthetics.

In Bangladesh and India, there are several artist run organizations and groups are practising SEA.

Bangladesh-

- Britto Art Trust

- Porapara Space for Artist
- Santaran Art Organization
- Gidree Bawlee
- Jog Art.

India-

- Khoj International Artist Association
- Peripheri assam
- Raqs Media Collective
- Art Oxygen
- Artreach India.
- Cona.
- Khanabadosh

Besides these organizations, individual artist also involved with some SEA projects and the artists are-

Bangladesh-

- Ripon Saha
- Joydev Roaja
- Sumana Akter
- Ali Asgar
- Sanjoy Chakraborty
- Arafat Korim
- "Subodh"

India-

- Ieena Kejriwal
- Indrani Baruah
- Shweta Bhattad
- Samudra Kajal Saikia
- Shilpa Gupta

Research Questions :

- How artist define the socially engaged art projects ?
- Is there any existing boarder line between socially engaged art and the art activism ?

Aims and Objectives:

The goal of the study is to identify the potential and possibilities of Socially Engaged Art practice in Bangladesh and India.

Specific objectives -

- To collect information about the artist organization, groups and individual artist from Bangladesh and India who are involved with the socially engaged art practice.
- To identify how the practitioners of these countries are defining the socially engaged art practices.
- To identify the impact of SEA on the community or society in these countries.
- To identify the line between socially engaged art and art activism

Chapter Organization

The study is divided in six chapters excluding review of literature and bibliography.

Chapter one- Introduction and Definition of Socially Engaged Art. The term Socially Engaged Art will define along with it's characteristics, and others term.

Chapter Two- History of Socially Engaged Art. This chapter will give in detail the history of socially engaged art. It will explain the chronological developments of SEA, previous art movements which have great influence on SEA and the aesthetics. Besides that, some example of SEA projects will be discussed.

Chapter Three- Socially Engaged Art Practice in Bangladesh. This chapter will divide into two parts- Group Activities and Individual practice. In Group Activities the artist organization and groups of Bangladesh SEA projects will be portray and on the other side, in Individual Practice, artist who are practicing SEA individually in Bangladesh, will be discuss.

Chapter Four- Socially Engaged Art Practice in India. Like chapter three, this chapter will recapitulate into two parts- Group Activities and Individual practice and in these parts group and individual socially engaged art practice in the perspective of India will be delineate.

Chapter Five - Critical and Analytical Comparison of Socially Engaged Art In Bangladesh and India. In this chapter analytical comparison between Bangladesh and India will be discussed after careful observation on the basis of above study.

Chapter Six- Conclusion. In this chapter important concluding remarks will be given about the above chapters.

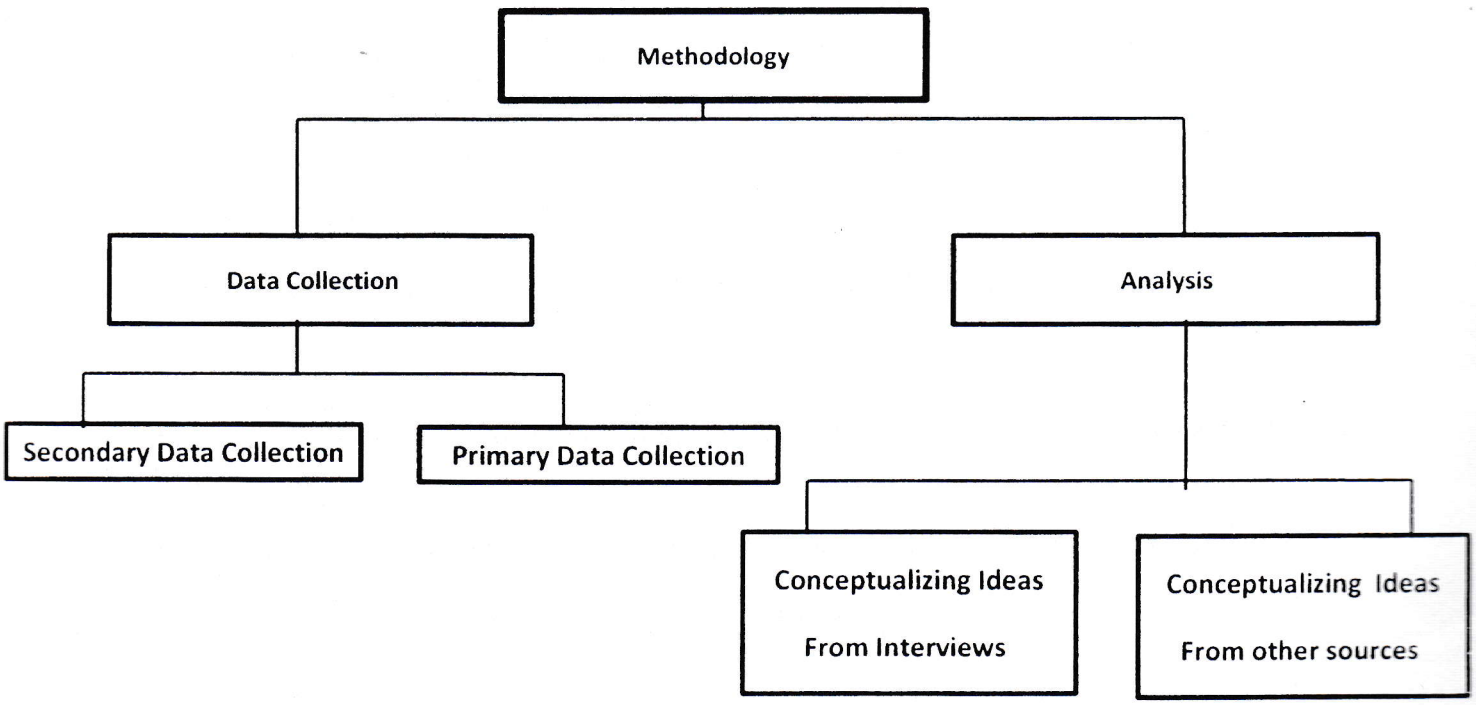
Activity Plan

First Year : Reviewing of Literature and secondary data collection

Second Year: Analysis and interpretation of secondary data and work plan and preparing questionnaire for the primary data.

Third Year : Analysing the primary data and final text writing with revision.

Methodology Chart



By following two steps, I will collect my data -

- Secondary Data Collection
- Primary Data Collection

In Secondary data collection, I will collect the data from-

- Books
- Information Published by the studios
- Magazines
- Journals
- Thesis done by this topic
- Catalogues
- Online sources
- Video documentation
- Archives

In primary data collection, I will collect the data from-

• Personal interview with the group and individual artist who are practising socially engaged art.

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